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ABSTRACT

American Indian literature deserves a more prominent place in the English language arts curriculum. Oral literature of American Indians includes didactic stories, told to maintain tribal mores and value systems; it also includes humorous and entertaining stories, as well as histories of various American Indian peoples. Anthropologists and folklorists have collected and published numerous volumes of American Indian oral literature. The work of Larry Evers and Felipe Molina is an outstanding example of a new approach to anthropology and folklore. They transcribe Yaqui Deer Song texts into written Yaqui and then into English. Their commentaries guide readers and enhance appreciation of the form and meaning of the texts as song-poems. In addition to the well-established American Indian poets such as N. Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Carter Revard, a growing number of younger American Indian poets have received critical attention and acclaim, such as Joy Harjo (Creek), Ray A. Young Bear (Mesquaki), Duane Niatum (Klallum), William Oandasan (Yuki), Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok), and Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Sioux). Many "as told to" autobiographies of American Indian men and women have enjoyed critical and popular success such as John Lane Deer and Richard Erdoes' "Lame Deer: Seeker of Visions" and Helen Sekaquaptewa and Louise Udall's "Me and Mine." Examples of this literature illustrate how it speaks directly to students; it can spark in students connections and response. (Contains 26 references.) (TB)

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**AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE
APPROPRIATE FOR SECONDARY AND MIDDLE-LEVEL STUDENTS**

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American Indian Literature **Appropriate for Secondary and Middle-Level Students**

Introduction

American Indian literature deserves a more prominent place in the English Language Arts curriculum. Having said that, let me assure you that I am not here to advocate replacing The Odyssey with Lakota or Ponca or Tlingit hero stories. Rather, I am here to tell some stories about connections--connections between American Indian literatures and other literatures in the English Language Arts curriculum; connections between American Indian literature and our students; and connections between the literature and ourselves as English Language Arts teachers. Because of its versatility, American Indian literature is a particularly effective vehicle for diversifying the English Language Arts curriculum. It is also an effective means to accommodate student diversity and to achieve goals and objectives of multicultural education.

The purpose of this presentation is to share with you the benefits to ourselves, our students and our field which accrue from teaching American Indian literature, a literature both rooted in and perpetuating ancient oral traditions; a growing and evolving body of work crafted by some of today's finest American writers. I hope to confirm the efficacy of American Indian literature as a means to treat the American Indian experience with sensitivity and as a means to integrate literary categories typically considered discrete. I would like to begin by commenting generally on features of American Indian literature which make it particularly well-suited for inclusion in the English Language Arts curriculum.

American Indian Literatures

"American Indian literature" is the oral and written expression of American Indian people. Oral literature of American Indians includes didactic stories, told to maintain tribal mores and values systems; it also includes humorous and

entertaining stories, as well as stories which chronicle the history of various American Indian peoples. There are sacred stories which describe the origins and the ceremonial life of the various tribes. There are songs which honor individuals and their families. Songs which document historical events such as battles with other tribes as well as ceremonial songs are sung on specific occasions, following specific protocol. Thematically, this oral literature speaks of spirituality, identity, family, community heroism, honor, love, beauty, and death. It speaks of the need for balance and harmony among all of creation. It describes sickness and hardship resulting from imbalance and disharmony.

Anthropologists and folklorists have collected and published numerous volumes of American Indian oral literature. Some of these projects are more sensitive and accurate than others. The best of these collections provides a foundation and source of content for the study of American Indian oral literature. The collaboration between non-Indian and Indian scholars has improved as Indians have gained greater control over the finished collaborative products. For example, the work of Larry Evers, a non-Indian English Professor, and Felipe Molina, a Yaqui Deer Singer, is an outstanding example of a new approach to anthropology and folklore (Evers and Molina, 1987). In their work Molina and Evers transcribe Yaqui Deer Song texts into written Yaqui and translate them into English as in the following example:

SEWA HUYA ANIWA

FLOWER WILDERNESS WORLD

*Empo sewa yo huya aniwa
empo yo huya aniwa
vaewa sola voyoka
Empo yo huya aniwa
vaewa sola voyoka
huya aniwaaa*

You are an enchanted flower wilderness world,
you are an enchanted wilderness world,
you lie with see-through freshness.
You are an enchanted wilderness world,
you lie with see-through freshness,
wilderness world.

...
*Ayamansu seyewailo
huyata naisukunisu
yo huya aniwapo
usyoli machi hekamake
usyolisi vaewa sola voyoka*

...
Over there, in the center
of the flower-covered wilderness,
in the enchanted wilderness world,
beautiful with the dawn wind,
beautifully you lie with see-through freshness,

huya aniwaaa
Empo yo huya aniwa
vaewa sola voyoka
huya aniwaaa

wilderness world.
 You are an enchanted wilderness world,
 you lie with see-through freshness,
 wilderness world (104)

Their individual commentaries guide readers and enhance appreciation of the form and meaning of the texts as song-poems. These and other American Indian song-poems are effective means through which poetic devices as such imagery and figurative language can be taught. In addition they are indispensable as examples of how aspects of poetic form (repetition and transition in the above example) contribute to the meaning (*seyawailo* as an integral part of Yaqui cosmology in the above example) of a poem. As evidenced by Ella Deloria's early work Dakota Texts (1978 [1932]) and Ofelia Zepeda's (1982) recent work on Papago linguistics, there has been and continues to be consistent interest and involvement on the part of American Indians in the recording of their own oral literatures.

The oral literature of American Indians informs their written literature. Poet and novelist N. Scott Momaday depends on the oral traditions of his people, the Kiowas, and those he learned during his childhood among the Navajos. Kenneth Lincoln (1983) commenting on Momaday's The Way to Rainy Mountain (1969) asserts:

Rather than separating past and present cultures, or making something new in a modern form, Momaday's intention is syncretic--to tend and nourish a life passed through his own family. In this sense he becomes a keeper of tribal culture and adds to the composing mosaic of Kiowa history (103).

In much the same way, novelist Leslie Marmon Silko both draws from and adds to the literary traditions of the Laguna; James Welch, the Blackfeet and Gros Ventre; and Louise Erdrich, the Ojibway.

In addition to the well-established American Indian poets Scott Momaday, James Welch, Leslie Silko, and Carter Revard, a growing number of younger

American Indian poets has received critical attention and acclaim. Among poets comprising this group are Joy Harjo (Creek), Ray A. Young Bear (Mesquaki), Duane Niatum (Klallum), William Oandasan (Yuki), Wendy Rose (Hopi/Miwok), and Paula Gunn Allen (Laguna/Sioux). The best known contemporary American Indian playwright is Hanay Geiogamah (Kiowa) whose New Native American Drama: Three Plays (1980) contains plays which focus on themes of modern American Indian life, particularly those of identity, stereotype eradication, and racism.

American Indian non-fiction is well represented in the genres of essay, autobiography, and "as told to" autobiography. Since the publication of Custer Died For Your Sins (1968), there has been no clearer, more consistent, or more persistent voice on American Indian political, social and philosophical issues than that of Vine Deloria, Jr. Several of his essays as well as excerpts from his book-length works are appropriate for classroom use. Deloria's sense of humor destroys the "stoic, humorless Indian" stereotype, as it undergirds his insightful commentary and discussion on a wide range of social, political, legal and spiritual issues confronting American Indian people today. D'Arcy McNickle's Native American Tribalism: Indian Survivals and Renewals (1973), is a thoughtful analysis of United States government American Indian policy from the viewpoint of a trained anthropologist and accomplished novelist.

As writers of their own life stories or as collaborators in "as told to" autobiographies, American Indian writers have distinguished themselves as autobiographers. The first written autobiography by an American Indian was William Apes' Son of the Forest (1829). University-educated and trained as a physician, Charles Eastman wrote his autobiography, From the Deep Woods to Civilization, in 1916. Themes of these early autobiographies centered on assimilation into and coping with Euro or Anglo-American culture. Scott Momaday's The Names (1976) explores his Kiowa, Cherokee, and non-Indian

cultural backgrounds. Hailed as the Native American version of Alex Haley's Roots when it was published, the work is an affirmation of "Indianness," a statement of American Indian identity and self-determination rather than assimilation.

Many "as told to" autobiographies of American Indian men and women have enjoyed critical and popular success. Included in this group are John Lane Deer and Richard Erdoes' Lane Deer: Seeker of Visions (1972) and Helen Sekaquaptewa and Louise Udall's Me and Mine (1969). The most influential collaborative American Indian autobiography is Black Elk and John Neihardt's Black Elk Speaks (1988 [1932]). In his introduction to the new edition of the work, Vine Deloria, Jr. states,

If any great religious classic has emerged in this century or on this continent, it must certainly be judged in the company of Black Elk Speaks and withstand the criticism which such a comparison would inevitably invite. The most important aspect of the book...is...its effect on...the contemporary generation of young Indians who have been aggressively searching for roots of their own structure of universal reality.... They look to [the book] for spiritual guidance, for sociological identity, for political insight, for affirmation of the continuing substance of Indian tribal life (xii-xiii).

Connections: American Indian Literature and Our Students

At this point, I would like to illustrate, through examples drawn from contemporary American Indian literature, how the literature speaks directly to our students, and, in so doing, examine how the literature can spark in our students connections and response. As described in the work of Erik Erikson (1968) and J. E. Marcia (1966), adolescence is a period of life during which individuals must resolve the conflict within themselves over who they are. This conflict reaches crisis proportions as individual struggle to select the most appropriate from a myriad of identity options. Adolescents seek answers to difficult questions: Why am I the way I am? Who are my people? Where does my

family come from? What do I believe? What do I value? What job or career may be right for me? What are my politics? How can I involve myself constructively in my community? According to Jerome Kagan (1972), "Adolescents of all societies must build a sense of self.... Our own community...celebrates the primacy of an autonomous belief system--possession of a separate and distinct set of values--as a necessary prerequisite for a well-delineated identity" (103). These realizations point to the struggle within adolescents of any American cultural group to "find themselves," to reach, as psychologists put it, "identity achievement status," to derive personal meaning from life through the development of a healthy sense of self and through entering into positive relationships with others.

During adolescence our students begin to develop the ability to reason abstractly, to engage in what Piaget called formal operational thought. As David Elkind (1984) says, "In adolescence, one develops the ability to think on a higher level, to think in a new way" (23), and in light of these newly forming cognitive capabilities, American Indian literature read in schools speaks directly to the adolescent and young adult particularly through the literary aspect of theme.

In her analysis of the dominant themes of novels depicting American Indian adolescents, Carol Markstrom-Adams (1990) identifies both universal themes and "cultural-specific" themes present in the literature. Universal themes include themes of identity, coming of age, self-consciousness, and sexual and platonic relationships, while cultural-specific themes include prejudice and discrimination toward American Indians, mixed-blood ancestry, and reaffirmation of American Indian cultural and spiritual systems (225-226).

The Owl's Song (1974) by Janet Campbell Hale (Coeur d'Alene) is a bildungsroman, "a novel that deals with the development of a young person, usually from adolescence to maturity" (Holman and Harmon, 1992, 53). The novel traces the intellectual and moral growth as well as the identity development of its protagonist, Billy White Hawk. Billy leaves the reservation to escape the

confusion which results from the death of his mother and his best friend's suicide. He finds himself in a big city, a symbol of everything in the world that is antithetical to the Indian experience. In school, he encounters the ignorance and racism of others toward American Indians. Here, he struggles with his own lack of understanding of his black and white classmates. And it is here he comes to realize the importance of his family, his American Indian upbringing, and the traditions of his people. He returns to the reservation, and following the death of his father, he discovers the interrelation of all creation around him as well as his place in it. He comes to a realization of who he really is.

Billy White Hawk was his man's name. He needed no other. He looked up into the blue summer skies where soft, billowy clouds drifted. He saw a bird soaring there, its black feathers glistening in the sunlight.... He was Billy White Hawk.... He was a man.... It was all right, now. It was all right. Manitous, spirits of the earth, wind, rain, sun. Father and grandfather and unknown ancestors. [Indian] country..., oceans, deserts, cities, it was all the same, now. It was all right (152-153).

Billy reconciles his internal conflict through an emotional, physical, and spiritual return to his people's ancestral homeland. In the process he rejects superficiality, materialism, and racism. Indian students, of course, see in Billy and his experiences near mirror images of aspects of their own experience. In Billy they find comfort in knowing their culture can be a source of stability in a chaotic world. Non-Indian students can benefit from reflection upon their own heritages and personal familial experiences. They grow from the knowledge that solutions to problems of identity often lie in turning inward toward one's own cultural heritage.

In Virginia Sneve's (Sioux) novel When Thunders Spoke (1974), Norman Two Bull encounters the racial hostility of a white shopkeeper as well as the slightly more subtle racism of a white minister. With the help of his father and grandfather, he is able to confront anti-Indian racism and to better understand

himself as a result. Norman learns to value the ways of the Lakota as espoused by his grandfather, Matt. At the same time, Norman, like most young adolescents, struggles to mature and come to more fully understand himself. Through the influence of his grandfather, he moves toward knowledge of traditional Lakota ways. He gains greater self-awareness and a more secure sense of himself as he is forced to confront differences between himself and the non-Indian shopkeeper who sees the world in terms of profit and materialism. Norman reconciles the identity conflict within himself as he confronts his mother, a converted Christian, and decides to honor traditional Lakota spiritual and familial values.

Adolescents can relate directly to the antagonism between Norman and his mother. His rejection of her attempt to mold his spirituality does not preclude the realization that he continues to love her.

Michael Dorris deals with the themes of individual identity and family relationships in Morning Girl (1992), a dual-voiced narrative depicting the love and rivalry of adolescent siblings. Like many students, the Indian protagonists of this novel, Morning Girl and her brother Star Boy, struggle to understand the physical upheaval and emotional storm and stress they undergo. The resolution of Morning Girl's and Star Boy's internal and relational conflicts lies in their maturation, and in their growing understanding of their own Indian culture. They learn to appreciate the comfort provided by their grandparents, the example set by their parents, and the solace they find in living harmoniously with world around them.

My brother stopped where he was. His hands were filled with food he couldn't drop and waste. There was fresh honey smeared on his chin. He closed his eyes, then opened them. He looked at me. I don't know how long we stood that way, but it was as if just the two of us were there. I was aware of the sound of babies, of waves, of the birds as they flapped their wings above the food, but I heard them through deep water. Star Boy and I reached across the space between us, we made a fishing line with our eyes and each pulled the other to the center (50-51).

Such realizations speak directly to Indian students. Non-Indian students will find direct parallels between their own internal doubts, parental conflicts, sibling rivalries, and family experiences and those depicted by Dorris.

Autobiographical and biographical works such as Sekaquaptewa's Me and Mine and others mentioned earlier provide students with opportunities to compare and contrast their own upbringings with those of American Indians from other tribes or from previous and present generations. Essays by American Indian writers convey alternative points of view, potential opportunities for values clarification on the part of adolescents. Frequently anthologized short stories by critically acclaimed writers such as Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve (Sioux--"The Medicine Bag") and Anna Lee Walters (Oto-Pawnee--"Chapter One") deal with universal as well as cultural-specific themes identified by Markstrom-Adams. An excellent source of American Indian prose and poetry authored by adolescents is T. D. Allen's Arrows Four: Prose and Poetry by Young American Indians (1974). In poems such as Rudy Bantista's "Pony Song," the writer's search for self is evident.

i do not ride a painted pony
 i've never felt his strong lean stride
 i ride a car from detroit
 and i sit in class
 where they teach me about the great
 white
 romans
 and not of my dry brown mother
 the painted ponies have all gone
 only my grandmother remembers
 i ride a car from detroit
 and my dry brown earth-mother
 will not speak to me now (84).

In as much as American Indian authors express universal themes in their literatures, adolescents of any culture can relate to and compare actions and themes in the work to those they might engage in and conceptualize themselves. To the degree that American Indian authors express "cultural specific" actions

and themes, non-Indian students can contrast their own developing values with those of adolescents from a different group. As Elkind (1984) suggests,

To acquire a consistent sense of self, we must encounter a great number of different experiences within which we can discover how our feelings, thoughts, and beliefs are different from those of other people. At the same time we also need to learn how much we are like other people. We need to discover that other people don't like insults any more than we do and that other people appreciate compliments just as we do. As a result of this slow process of differentiating ourselves from others, in terms of how we are alike and yet different from them, we gradually arrive at a stable and unique perception of ourself (15-16).

Teachers of English Language Arts can assist their students in this process of developing an integrated identity. Among other things, teachers can present their students with a variety of reading materials and provide opportunities for various responses to the reading. Markstrom-Adams (1990) concludes that

...it is important to stress the value of novels for educating young people about the prejudice and discrimination toward minorities that are still prevalent in society. It would seem that novels set in contemporary times with minority characters as their focus are useful tools for teaching adolescents about groups different from their own. Further, reading novels and becoming interested in the characters broadens an adolescent's perspectives and contributes to greater tolerance and understanding of those who are different from oneself (237).

The points of connection, of commonality and contrast, between the experiences described in American Indian literatures and those of non-Indian students serve at once as both bridges between the cultures and mirrors reflecting aspects of the universal human condition.

Through exposure to the experiences of American Indians, non-Indian students gain a more complete understanding of cultural diversity. Points of difference and conflict emerge. As clearly depicted in their literatures, American Indians wrestle against racism. Their philosophical and spiritual orientations differ from those of non-Indians. Non-Indian students, however, through discussion and clarification of such differences, can achieve greater

understanding of themselves and others. Perhaps more importantly, through the experience of reading and responding to a broader and more diverse array of literary choices, including American Indian literature, all students uncover shared experiences which serve as points of connection between individuals and members of other cultures. These common experiences bridge the gaps between students, and make possible relationships which are based on understanding rather than on ignorance and fear.

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